

## **Coping with Tragedy: After Hurricane Katrina**

### **Surviving Sudden Loss**

When a hurricane strikes, individuals are often left with a painful and shocking loss. When the catastrophic event is sudden, as during a natural disaster like Hurricane Ivan, it doubles our pain and intensifies the grief. Mourning and recovery are more difficult for surviving family members, regardless of their age. Many, if not most, survivors will be in denial of the tragedy, some for a very long time.

### **Children's Response to Loss**

In general, a catastrophic event may mean a loss of sense of security for a child. Also, while pre-schoolers have difficulty understanding that loss may not be temporary, older children, between the ages of five and nine, begin to experience grief more like adults. Children express grief in a variety of ways, including appearing to be unaffected. But, no matter how a child appears on the outside, there may be grief beneath the surface. Here are some of the common ways children respond to loss:

- Anxiety or panic
- Unexplained anger
- Boisterous play
- Crying often and easily
- Difficulty concentrating
- Sleeplessness
- Loss of appetite or other eating disruption
- Increased physical complaints or illnesses
- Acting younger, possibly reverting to bed-wetting, thumb sucking or baby talk
- Fear of being alone
- Sharp drop in school performance or refusal to attend school

### **Helping Children Cope with a Loss**

- Respond patiently to children's concerns. It can take them a long time to recover from a loss. Expect their grief to revisit in cycles as strong reminders, such as the anniversary of the event, reawaken grief.
- Keep children's routines as regular as possible. Children grieve not only for the loss related to the event, but also changes in the household environment of family and friends.
- Give children a chance to talk about their feelings. But don't push them to talk. Children, like adults, need time to grieve and be upset. Let them know that you are ready to listen and provide reassurance when they express their feelings. Answer their questions about the event simply and honestly. But, only offer details they can absorb. Don't overload them with information.